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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 002837

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SUBJECT: THREE CHANGES IN CABINET FORESHADOW MORE TO COME

REF: KABUL 2756

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Stacy Nichols for reasons 1.4
(B) and (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The National Assembly's Lower House overwhelmingly approved three of four nominees involved in President Karzai's much-anticipated Cabinet shuffle this week, moving forward on what many in the international community are hoping is a renewed focus fighting corruption and improving security. The fourth nominee, reportedly unhappy with a demotion from Interior to Refugees, called in "sick" and did not appear before the Lower House. A fifth official involved in the shuffle, but whose position does not require parliamentary confirmation, is also unenthused with his new job. These Cabinet moves come after a complicated series of political maneuvers and backroom deals with one eye on improving the government's response to the many challenges facing the country, and another on shoring up support for Karzai's re-election campaign. Rumors abound of a second round of Cabinet changes, probably focusing on economic ministries or smoothing over relations with those upset by the first round of changes.

Nominees Win Comfortable Victory Margins

¶2. (C) Lower House MPs delivered comfortable winning margins to the three nominees Oct. 20, despite a lengthy Q-and-A session preceding the vote full of critical comments about the nominees' qualifications and President Karzai's motivation for making the switches. New Interior Minister Atmar, facing the most vocal opposition, still won confirmation by 132 votes for to 68 against, with 10 abstentions. Education Minister and long-time Karzai "fixer" Farooq Wardak had 139 votes for, 62 against, and 7 abstentions. Agriculture Minister Asif Rahimi had the largest margin, with 156 votes for, 50 against, and 7 abstentions. With more than 210 MPs present for the votes, the Lower House had one of its largest attendance rates in recent memory -- last month's confirmation vote for new Attorney General Aloko, a previous recent high-point of attendance, had just 190 MPs present.

¶3. (C) Despite criticisms that Karzai was stocking his Cabinet with Pashtuns or that the proposed changes were "too little, too late" to address the country's problems (reftel), most MPs eventually fell into line behind the president. In the days preceding the votes, Atmar's supporters had

identified three blocs of opposition in the Lower House to his nomination: Pashtun fundamentalists, led by Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf (Kabul, Pashtun) upset by his ties to the communist government; northern MPs suspicious of Karzai's supposed "Pashtunization" of key government posts; and Tajiks supportive of former Interior Minister Zarak Mawbel (the latter two blocs contained substantial overlap). Warak, as one of Karzai's closest allies and tied to the majority Pashtun Hezb-e-Islami movement, also drew suspicion from northern Tajiks and Uzbeks generally opposed to Karzai's government.

14. (C) With these sizable blocs potentially aligned against their confirmations Atmar and Wardak, along with the president and other supporters engaged in extensive lobbying and political bargaining for their confirmations. Many believe Sayyaf's concerns were addressed with the promotion of former Kandahar Governor Assadullah Khalid to Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs, although it's unclear whether Khalid will take up that post (see para 8), and promises of other promotions for the former Pashtun warlord's allies. Karzai was also able to wedge into northern opposition to his Pashtun appointees with other moves designed to appeal to Uzbek or Tajik groups, including a possible resolution to Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum's status in exchange for votes for Atmar and Wardak. Notably, Lower House Speaker Yunus Qanooni (Kabul, Tajik), a frequent critic of Karzai's promotion of Pashtuns over Tajiks, was out of the country this week, leaving the Lower House gavel to Karzai supporter Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yasini (Nangarhar, Pashtun).

KABUL 00002837 002 OF 002

Few Fess Up To Dissention

15. (C) With Parliament's secret ballot system of confirming Cabinet nominees, it is difficult to ascertain who ended up voting against the new ministers. MP Mohammad Almas (Parwan, Tajik) held a dinner four nights before the vote for more than 80 MPs inclined to oppose Atmar, but clearly did not hold on to that many votes. Two days after the votes, PolOff scoured the halls of parliament, looking for any MP to fess up to casting a no vote. No one took the bait. Even MPs like Rahman Oughly (Faryab, Uzbek) and Abbas Noyan (Kabul, Hazara), sharply critical of Atmar and the Karzai government in their remarks before the vote, demurred and suggested they ended up supporting the nominees. Those close to Zarak's brother, MP Sediq Usmani (Parwan, Tajik), even said he ended up supporting Atmar.

16. (C) Feedback from Karzai supporters provided a more likely portrait of the opposition. Shukria Barakzai (Kabul, Pashtun), leader of the forward-thinking Third Line movement, said Pashtun fundamentalists like Sayyaf likely fell into line behind Karzai, while Uzbek and Tajiks from the north constituted the bulk of the 60-some no votes. Barakzai believes Haji Mohammad Mohaqqueq (Kabul, Hazara) kept most Hazara votes behind the nominees.

Loose Ends Still Out There

17. (C) Despite the three successful confirmation votes, the notable absence of Ministry of Refugees nominee Zarak stood out. Zarak failed to appear before the Lower House, with his staff making apologies for their boss's sudden "illness" that prevented him from testifying. It was no secret Zarak was unhappy with his move from Interior to Refugees, and several MPs said he and other Tajiks had pressed Karzai hard to reverse the transfer. Zarak reportedly told Karzai of his plans to ignore his new assignment, to which Karzai warned would result in Zarak finding himself further isolated. As it stands, Zarak has yet to report to the Refugees Ministry and current minister Sheer Mohammad Etebari says he has instructions to stay at

the helm until further notice.

¶8. (C) Assadullah Khalid, Karzai's would-be Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs, has also let it be known he is unlikely to assume his new duties and hopes for a better offer to come his way. With the position not requiring parliamentary confirmation, his first duty would have been to introduce the other three nominees to the Lower House before their votes. However, Khalid has yet to report for duty in Farooq Wardak's old office, threatening to derail the compromise Karzai won with Sayyaf to support Atmar in exchange for promotions for people like Khalid.

Another Round In The Works?

¶9. (C) Given the amount of backroom negotiations involved in the lead-up to and execution of this Cabinet shuffle, most expect a second round of moves is already in the works. Speculation centers on the economic-related ministries (Finance, Commerce, Mines, Energy) and a multi-person swap to appease Zarar with a more prestige assignment. Other names frequently coming out of the rumor mill for promotions or demotions include Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak and Herat Gov. Sayed Hussein Anwari. With more than 40 percent of the Cabinet and both defense and interior ministers now Pashtun, Karzai will have to be careful not to further antagonize northern ethnic groups or overplay his hand and catch the ire of the international community by promoting loyalists over capable bureaucrats.

WOOD